Shakespeare's Stratford

Memories That Come to One in The Poet's Town.

It is a fortunate thing for the world that Shakespeare's father moved out of Snitterfield into Stratford about the middle of the sixteenth century. People laugh at you if you take names seriously in these days, as Mr. George Moore takes them, but nevertheless I do not believe it is humanly possible for a great poet to be born in a place called Snitterfield. I will not discuss here the question whether Stratford is the most beautiful of alll names for a poet's birthplace. You can take no objection to it, however, on the score of indignity.

Stratford—Shakespeare's Stratford—Stratford that draws men and women with their strange voices and their guide-books from all corners of the earth—is now little more than a name. Or, rather, it is a spirit, surviving in spite of all the grocers and the haberdashers of the place who do reverence to commensense and the commonplace from behind their modern shop windows. Here and there the spirit of Stratford expresses itself in beauty, or, if not in beauty, at least in a delightful quaintness. At the corner of a street stands an ancient cross-timbered house, put together with something of a child's clumsiness and pleasure in its work, or a featureless old chapel, of whose beauty the devastating wind and rain, and not the men who built it, are the architects. The Chapel of the Guild, indeed, is the beginning of the single piece of continuous old-world loveliness of which Stratford can boast. Beside it stand the Guildhall and the long old almshouses with their projecting upper stories, their little leaded windows and and their modest doors. Walking past the antique—though, I suppose, "restored"—fronts of these houses, one does really breathe Shakespeare. The people who hobble in and out of the doorways are Shakespeare's people—Verges and Hugh Oatcake and George Seacole, and the rest. They are so real, indeed, that at first I felt sure they must be gotten up for the occasion, and be employed by some Shakespeare Society to show their withered faces at the doors in order to give an atmosphere to the town.

An Oldtimer.

I spoke to one of the old men—a toothless old fellow, with red-rimmed, watery eyes that had dwindled with age—an old man garrulous, wearing a collar of a pre-Gladstonian fashion and clothes to match—and he took me into his inner room. "Oh, I be an old man," he quavered, shaking his wisp of face at vacancy; "I be an old man, I be, though I bain't more than thirty or forty to look at. I be eighty-six years old. It's as true as God's in heaven, if I was never to stir hand or foot again."

I told him he did not look it; which was true enough, for he looked at least ninety.

"Yes," he went on, "I were born in 1823. I bain't no scholard, sir, and I don't know whether I've reckoned it up right, but perhaps you be a scholard, and can reckon it up for me."

He chuckled with pleasure when I told him he was in his eighty-sixth year. "My eye!" he said; "I have done a bit of kickin' about, I have." And thereupon he proceeded to unfold to me a story of himself and a flood and a boat and an escape from death by drowning, about which things, he said, he often thought when he was lying in his bed at night. I listened to the ins and outs of his story for about a quarter of an hour, trying to disentangle the sense of it. At last I had to cut short a tediousness that was worse than Dogberry's.

As I was going to ask him what he thought of all this Shakespeare business. "Eh?" he grunted, with a vacant look, as he leaned, shaking, on his staff. I repeated my question. His face broke into a tremble of deaf man's intelligence. "Yes," he nodded, as though heartilly agreeing with me; "I have seen some kickin' about, I have; it's as true as I'm a sinful man."

Spirit of Shakespeare.

I sought the spirit of Shakespeare's Stratford, however, not only in the old men of the almshouse, but in the common sights of the town. I visited the house in which Shakespeare was born, and paid sixpence for it. I visited the room in which he went to school, and paid sixpence for it. I visited the church in which he was buried, and paid sixpence for it. I went out to Shottery to see the cottage in which he made love to Anne Hathaway, and ought to have paid sixpence for it, but I resolved to allow myself at least one unbought mood in Stratford, so I remained outside the door.

I suppose all this sixpenny business is necessary. It is very discouraging, however, to the imagination that wishes to forget itself in bygone centuries. Even as I approached the substantial dwelling house in which Shakespeare was born a little well-dressed, golden-haired boy ran toward me, the light of commerce in his eyes.

"Show you around, sir?" he offered. I thanked him and said "No."

"Repeat the fourth act of 'The Merchant of Venice,' sir?" he asked me. I again thanked him and said "No."

"Tell you all about Shakespeare, sir?" he pleaded, making a third attempt at my pocket. Being weak of will, I hesitated.

"What do you know about Shakespeare?" I asked him.

He immediately began reciting. "What is Antonio here ready so please your grace I am sorry for thee thou art come to answer," and so on for about a hundred lines of "The Merchant of Venice," never even pausing for breath or to put in a stop or to end a line. He appeared not at all to enjoy giving this entertainment publicly in the street, and looked particularly nervous when another small boy came up and stood beside him and grinned at him. At last I put an end to his pair with a Stratford sixpence. As I slipped off the other small boy ran after me.

"Like a posy, sir?" he asked; "if you come over the road, I'll give you one for a halfpenny." He was wearing a beautiful white linen collar, too, the little Shylock.

Henley Street House.

Shakespeare's house in Henley street, with its shattered floors, its restored windows and its bescribbled walls, is, of course, the living center of the Stratford that one goes to visit. It has a floating population of Americans and Germans and automobilists, who come and gaze and go away, content because they are able to say that they have visited Shakespeare's birthplace. Each of the rooms has a constant population of one, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, serving as a gossiping guide-book to the place. If, when you enter, you attempt to pass right throught the front room, the attendant—a stout, hearty man, with the white mustache of an old warrior—calls out, anxiously, disapprovingly, "Stop a minute, please!" Then, having got himself into position, he embarks upon his set speech, beginning, "This is the room in which the Sakespeare family took its meals," and ending, "This is the fireplace. In the seat in the corner it is probable that the poet often sat when a boy." After that he invites you to sit where Shakespeare sat, the ladies to go first and give an example of courage to the gentlemen. The splendid thing about the old fellow is that he appears thoroughly to enjoy seeing you do this, like nurse watching the movements of a happy child.

There was a charming silver-haired lady in one of the upper rooms of the building, now used as a Shaespeare museum. She held a crowd of young honeymooners rapt as, with pencil pointing to Sakespeare's bust, she declaimed the epitaph beneath it, line by slow line. A delightful, sentimental lady, wearing a pair of gold-rimmed blue spectacles and with a bunch of primroses at her breast, she spoke to the surrounding trippers about "our Shakespeare" with an ardor that made them gape with wonder.

THE MAIN CONSIDERATION.

Who cares for the time or the money we'll miss
Ere a notable prize can be won?
The question of real importance is this:
Will it be a good job when it's done?
When you start a canal, men appeal to your fears
With figures surprising in dollars and years.
To all queries save one the world closes its ears:
Will it be a good job when it's done?

Who cares for the hours that the orators keep?
We list to each favorite son
And inquire without hoping that talk will prove cheap
"Will is be a good job when it's done?"
When reform or revision is set under way,
Be the cost what it may, e'en ten millions a day,
We're content if we're sure we can candidly say,
"It'll be a good job when it's done."

MATCH FACTS.

John Walker, an English chemist, was experimenting in 1827 with an inflammable mixture for use on shipboard.

One day Mr. Walker happened to rub a stick dipped in this mixture across a table. There was a report, the stick took fire, and, because John Walker was no fool, the match was born.

John Walker, the match's inventor, put his wonderful invention on the market in April, 1827. The Walker match was as big as a leadpencil and it cost a shilling a box. Because it could only be lighted by drawing it through a piece of sand-paper folded in two, the Holden match supplanted it is 1833. The Holden was a lucifer; it ignited more easily than the Walker; so it put the Walker out of business.

Sweden is today the home of the match industry. Sweden exports annually two billion boxes of incomparable matches.

But there is no statue to John Walker.

ALLIANCES FOR PEACE.

Mr. Carnegie will find plenty of sympathy for his desire to organize a league of peace among the nations of the world, but he has yet to point the way to the realization of his dream. It is perfectly clear that if the United States and several others of the great powers could be brought to the point of mutually abandoning all ambitions that are likely to bring them into conflict with one another, and to form a league for the forcible imposition of arbitration upon the rest of the world, we should have international peace of a sort. But the premises call for so many things that are at present impracticable that Mr. Carnegie cannot justly complain if his aspirations are still regarded as an iridescent dream.

STIRRED HIS AMBITION.

Boy (in rapt contemplation of picture book)—Mummy, are there really mermaids?"

"Yes, dear. They are the sea fairies."

(Pause).

"Mummy, you do want me to go to sea, don't you?"

"Yes, darling; I want you to go into the navy."

"Well, then, I think I'll be a diver."
—Punch.